



Darling Charming

and the

Horse of a Different Color



A LITTLE SIR GALLOPAD
STORY

Suzanne Selfors

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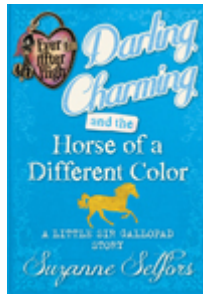
A Little Sir Gallopad Story

By Suzanne Selfors



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The stables at Ever After High, a boarding school for the sons and daughters of fairytale characters, were no ordinary stables. In fact, they were quite *hextraordinary*, for they'd been designed to house a variety of magical creatures.

One entire wing of the facility had been built of stone and thickly coated with fire-repellent paint, in case a student needed to board a pet dragon. The unicorn stall was planted with thick vines and trees, since unicorns love to hide. The Pegasus stall was extra-wide, allowing for the stretching and grooming of wings, and the griffin stall contained a perch and a large nest.

But not all the creatures that slept in the stables were magical. There were quite a few horses at Ever After High. All the King's Horses were the largest and most ill-tempered. They served All the King's Men, patrolling the campus at night to make sure students didn't try to sneak out and break the headmaster's curfew. But of equal importance, they made sure no one tried to sneak in, like a village boy who'd been starstruck by Darling Charming's family fame, or an ogre who had a hankering for Hagatha's stone soup. All the King's Horses were black as night, with cropped manes and flared nostrils. They were respected *and* feared. No students were allowed to ride them.

The prettiest horses were reserved for the Princessology students. These gentle beasts were selected for their calm dispositions. Part of a princess's thronework was learning to groom her individual horse. Their manes were constantly being braided, dyed, and curled. It took a special type of horse to put up with that much fussing.

Then there were the horses ridden by the Hero Training students. They varied in shape, size, and personality, but all had one thing in common—strength. These horses had to gallop, jump, and swim across moats while carrying a rider who was heavy with armor.

Last, and certainly least, there were the oddballs. The misfits. The ones that didn't quite fit in but had somehow ended up at Ever After High. There was the mule that pulled Groundskeeper Green Thumb's cart, hauling weeds and delivering vegetables to the school's Castleteria. There was the

donkey that gave rides to younger siblings when they came to visit, as well as the llama that basically just stood around and spat at passersby.

And then there was the horse who could change colors.

And here's how he ended up at Ever After High.

Like most creatures that are lost and then found, the horse had a backstory that was short on joy and long on sorrow. He was born, as many horses are, in a barn on a farm. The farmers, Peter Pumpkin-Eater and his wife, Penelope Pumpkin-Eater, grew pumpkins, of course—some large enough to be hollowed out and lived in, and others of the perfect shape to be turned into coaches. The Pumpkin-Eaters required muscular draft horses to pull the plows in spring and haul the pumpkins to market in fall. After a year, it became clear that one particular foal wasn't going to grow as big as the others. He was not only a good head shorter but also skinnier than most, and thus wasn't cut out for pumpkin farming. And even though he possessed a beautiful coat of pure white hair, the Pumpkin-Eaters didn't want to keep him. "What good's a pretty horse if he can't do his share of work?" Peter asked as he nibbled on roasted pumpkin seeds.

"You got that right!" Penelope said as she sprayed whipped cream on a huge slice of pumpkin pie. So they hung a sign around the horse's neck that read RUNT FOR SALE, FIVE DOLLARS and tied him to the fence at the end of their long driveway. Then they hung a jar around his neck. "Have them put the money in this here jar," Penelope told the horse. They filled a bowl with water and another with oats, then left him there to wait. The horse ate all the oats and drank all the water. Then he wondered what would happen next.

Nothing much happened—at least, not right away. A butterfly landed on the horse's nose, then flew away. A pair of songbirds quarreled on a nearby branch. A beetle dug a hole in the dirt and disappeared. But no one came down the road, not even by pumpkin carriage. Hours passed. The day grew hot and the horse grew bored. He ate all the grass he could find, then began to nibble the vines that clung to the fence posts. And just when his eyelids began to feel heavy and he was about to lie down for a nap, he heard a sound—a chugging in the distance. He flicked his ears, then stomped one front hoof. Someone was coming! Would it be a new owner who would feed him lots of oats and let him run free in a field? He snorted with

excitement.

The truck's brakes screeched as it stopped at the driveway. The driver's door opened, and a red fox in denim overalls stepped out. The horse watched curiously as the fox sauntered up to him.

"I do declare, it's mighty toasty out here." The fox pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed at his furry forehead.

The passenger door opened, and a cat hopped out. He was heavysset and was wearing the same kind of denim overalls. He also wore a pair of dark glasses. "Why'd we stop? Did ya find us a job?" He pulled a cane from the truck and tapped it on the ground as he walked.

"I stopped because I think I found us our next meal." The fox smiled slyly at the horse.

The cat smiled. His teeth appeared to be very sharp. "Is it a pigeon? Or a mouse? I love me a good mouse."

"No. It's a horse."

The cat stopped in his tracks. He tucked his cane under his arm. "I don't eat horse," he said with a scowl. "I got me a delicate palate."

The fox rolled his eyes. "The horse is not to eat, my dearest friend. The horse is to sell."

The cat, who was blind, ran his fingers along his whiskers. "Sell? But don't it belong to someone?"

"Indeed it does not." The fox tucked his handkerchief back into his pocket. "It is wearing a sign that says 'Free.'"

Even though the horse couldn't get a good look at the sign, he was pretty sure it didn't say FREE. Mrs. Pumpkin-Eater had said to put the money in the jar. The Pumpkin-Eaters never gave anything away.

The fox strode around the horse. "It's a runt, and a bit on the skinny side, but I'm certain it will fetch enough money to buy us a nice meal at that restaurant you like."

The cat clapped his paws. "Oooh, you mean the Bone and Gristle? I love that place." The fox untied the sign and the jar and tossed them aside. "Greetings to you, kind horse. I am Mr. Fox and this is my traveling companion, Mr. Cat. We are delighted to make your acquaintance." Though he was using very polite words, there was a wicked tone to the fox's voice, and it made the horse wary. He tried to step away. "There is no need to be

afraid,” the fox told him, with a sly look in his eyes. “Are you hungry, perchance?”

Was he hungry? The oats had run out hours ago, and the small patches of grass weren’t doing much to fill his tummy. He nodded eagerly.

“Then, good sir, come with me and you shall be rewarded with some vittles.” The fox untied the rope from the fence and started to lead the horse toward the truck.

With food on his mind, the horse followed the fox up a ramp and into the truck’s bed. Once inside, the horse looked around. The truck bed was empty. No food. No water. He neighed and whipped around just as the back doors slammed shut, leaving him in total darkness. Then the truck’s engine rumbled to life and the wheels began to roll. The horse’s legs trembled with fear. Something was terribly wrong. Where were they taking him?

Up at the farmhouse, the Pumpkin-Eaters were too busy eating pumpkin pie to notice that their horse had been stolen.

The ride was long and bumpy. The horse could hear the fox and the cat singing along to the radio. Then they started arguing about where they should sell their newly acquired property.

“I know a wicked witch who uses horse tails in her potions,” the cat said. “And there are those two kids who keep tumbling down that hill. I bet they’d like a horse to carry their pail of water.”

“While those are worthy suggestions, I have an idea that is much better,” the fox said.

“Yeah, what is it?”

“Trust me. Have I ever led you astray?”

“Only on a daily basis,” the cat said. Then the truck veered sharply to the left.

The horse, who’d never been anywhere but the Pumpkin-Eaters’ farm, lay on the cold floor of the truck’s bed and sighed. He wouldn’t have minded carrying water for two clumsy kids, but he certainly didn’t want to become a part of a witch’s potion. He hoped this road would take him somewhere nice—or at least somewhere that had a full bowl of oats.

The horse awoke to the sound of the truck doors opening. He squinted as

sunlight streamed in. “Come on,” the cat said, yanking on the rope that was still tied around the horse’s neck. The horse got to his hooves and walked down the ramp and into a place that was as different from the farm as oats are different from pumpkins. He blinked. Where was he?

A large, colorful tent stood before him. The banner above the entrance read THE PUPPETEER’S TRAVELING PUPPET SHOW. A line of parents and children stood at the ticket window. “Buy your tickets for the show,” a man called as he walked through the crowd. “The puppets are so lifelike you’ll think they’re real!” Another man handed out balloons while a third sold root beer floats from a wheeled cart. The scent of buttered popcorn and cotton candy puffballs filled the horse’s nostrils. His stomach growled.

The children all seemed excited for the show. Some squealed with happiness. Others ran in circles around their parents’ legs. “Do not run,” one of the mothers called to her daughter. “A Charming princess never runs. A Charming princess waits patiently.” The little girl, who’d been chasing after two boys, returned to her mother’s side in the line.

“What have we here?” An elderly man with a mop of silver hair approached. “That’s a lovely little horse, Mr. Fox. Did you steal it?”

“Indeed I did not, Mr. Puppeteer,” the fox said with a bow. “We have mended our old ways. This horse is rightfully ours.”

“Rightfully ours,” the cat said with a nod.

“However...” The fox flicked his long red tail. Then he pressed his paws together. “We do find ourselves in a bit of a financial predicament and could use some cash. We might be persuaded to part with this lovely beast, for the right price.”

The Puppeteer stroked the horse’s white mane. “He’s a beauty, no doubt about it, but he needs fattening up. You haven’t been feeding him enough.”

“On account of our lack of funds,” the fox said with a shrug.

The Puppeteer’s smile set the horse at ease. “I could use him to pull the puppet wagon. And I’d better take him off your hands, just to make sure he’s treated right.” The Puppeteer pulled a well-worn leather wallet from his back pocket. After a quick round of negotiating, the puppet master handed the fox a crisp bill.

“We are most grateful,” the fox said.

The cat licked his lips. “To the Bone and Gristle!” Then without further

ado, the fox and the cat jumped back into their truck and drove away.

“Welcome to your new home,” the Puppeteer said as he removed the rope from the horse’s neck. The horse was grateful to be free of his captors. He bowed his head.

It turned out that the Puppeteer was a kindly old man. The horse ate well and fattened up in no time. Despite his small stature, he grew strong enough to pull the little puppet cart. The Puppeteer and his crew traveled from village to village, putting on puppet shows during the day and sleeping beneath the stars at night. It took only a few days for the horse to adjust to the nomadic lifestyle. And as long as his belly was full, he was content.

But a few years later in his career with the Puppeteer’s Traveling Puppet Show, fate stepped in, as it tends to do, and everything changed.

On that particular, fateful night, the show was sold out. The tent echoed with laughter as people watched two puppets bonk each other over the heads with pie pans and rolling pins. The cotton candy maker couldn’t spin fast enough to meet the demand, and so much popcorn was spilled that it looked like a snowstorm. When the show was over, the horse stood next to his wagon. Kids huddled around, petting and hugging him. He always loved that part of the evening, especially licking the popcorn salt and caramel apple goo that lingered on their fingers.

“Well, I do declare.” The horse looked up and saw a familiar face smirking at him. “I see you’ve been eating well,” the Fox said.

“While we’ve been starving.” The cat stood next to the fox. He was leaning on his cane. “That don’t seem fair.”

“Indeed it does not.” The fox flicked his tail. “We found the horse this nice home, and now he’s eating better than us.” They did look a bit worse for wear. The fox’s overalls had been patched at the knees, and the cat’s were covered in stains. And both critters looked sorely in need of a good bath.

“Since we find ourselves short on cash, should we *acquire* him again?” the fox asked the cat.

“Sounds like a plan to me. Them trolls pay good money for horsemeat.”

“Yes, they do. We’ll wait until dark.” After a wicked laugh, the fox and the cat got into their truck and drove away.

The horse had no way to tell the Puppeteer what had happened. That night, while the Puppeteer and his crew ate their supper inside the tent, the horse ate a bucket of alfalfa. The stars twinkled and the crickets sang, and after finishing his delicious meal, the horse settled on his bed of straw and closed his eyes for a nice sleep.

“Get up,” a familiar voice whispered. A tugging sensation woke the horse. He darted to his hooves. The night was moonless, and a thick, pea soup fog had drifted in. Someone had tied a rope around his neck, and he was being pulled away from his straw bed. Whoever was pulling him was strong. As soon as he saw the truck’s headlights, he knew that the fox and cat were trying to steal him again.

He neighed. He kicked. He bucked until he’d broken free of the rope. The cat tried to grab his mane. The fox tried to grab his tail. Panicked, the horse spun around twice, throwing the villains aside, then turned and galloped away as fast as he could. The cat jumped into the truck and followed. Headlights closed in. The road was no longer safe. Summoning all his strength and speed, the horse leaped over a drainage ditch and darted into the woods.

Some branches nearly tripped him, but he managed to charge deeper and deeper into the forest. As the headlights disappeared from view, the forest grew pitch black. The sound of the truck’s engine faded. The horse leaned against a tree, trying to steady his breath. All he could hear was his own heart pounding. But it only took a few moments for that drumming to be interrupted by two voices.

“Where is he? Do you see him?”

“No. I don’t see nothing but trees.”

Two flashlight beams swept the forest. The horse didn’t dare move, for a single step would draw attention. The beams swung left, then right, getting closer and closer. What could he do? His silky white hair would stand out in the darkness like a snowball in a sea of troll mud. He’d have to gallop again. But it was impossible to see. He’d be caught for sure.

The beams fell upon him. Oh no! This was it! He’d become the key ingredient in a witch’s potion. Or stew for a troll family. But as soon as the beams had landed, they moved away. *I need to hide*, the horse thought. *I wish I could be invisible.*

“I still don’t see nothing,” the cat said. The flashlight beams swept over

the horse again, but they didn't linger. "Nope, nothing there."

How can they not see me? the horse wondered. *They're looking right at me.*

"Drat!" complained the fox. "Well, I guess we'd better hit the road and find something else we can steal."

The horse waited until the truck had driven away and the headlights had faded. Except for a distant hooting owl, all was silent.

Exhausted and frightened, he collapsed to the forest floor.

At sunrise, as the first rays of light filtered through the trees, the horse made his way out of the forest. Then, like a racehorse, he galloped down the road, eager to have his breakfast. But when he reached the field, his spirits sank. Everything had been packed up and carted away. The tent was gone, and so were the Puppeteer and his crew. *Why didn't they wait for me? Did they think I'd run away? Did they think I'd been stolen?* He snorted with frustration. Perhaps he could catch up with them. They'd be making their way to the next village. If he galloped as fast as he could, he'd surely reach them.

Down the road he charged, his white mane rippling, his hooves kicking up rocks and dust. He passed a sign that read VILLAGE OF BOOK END, 30 MILES. That didn't seem too far. And if the Puppeteer wasn't there, then surely a nice villager would give him something to eat. But each time he heard an engine approaching, a shiver of fear darted down his spine and he dashed off the road, into the woods. What if the fox and cat drove this way, looking for him? The road suddenly felt too dangerous, so he decided to walk through the forest, keeping the road in view. When he grew thirsty, he followed his nose to a babbling brook. The water was crisp and clear. When his stomach began to rumble, he found a quiet grove where a deer had stopped to eat bark. The horse had never known that bark was edible. He tore a piece from a nearby tree. It tasted okay, but it was hard to swallow. He munched on some leaves, but they were bitter and stung his mouth. He searched for some grass, or perhaps a patch of moss. And that was when he realized that the road was no longer in view.

The horse was lost.

He hung his head, heavy with sadness. With a sigh, he sank to the forest

floor.

How much time passed, he wasn't certain, but a little buzzing sound woke him from his daze. A small creature flew around his head, leaving a trail of blue-and-green glitter in the air. Wings flitted wildly as the insect zipped round and round. The horse had been stung by a bee once and he didn't want to repeat that incident, so he scrambled to his feet, ready to bolt deeper into the forest.

"What are you doing here?" The insect hovered in front of the horse's face. He cocked his head in wonder. The creature wasn't a bee after all, but a very small person with wings. She held a little mop in one hand and a tiny bucket in the other. "Shouldn't you be with the rest of the creatures? The ceremony is going to begin very soon."

What was she talking about? What other creatures? His ears flattened.

"Oh, don't be scared. How rude of me. My name is Viola. I'm a cleaning fairy. I work at the school." She pointed in the opposite direction. "It's a very nice place. You'll be very happy there, I promise. You'll have a stable to sleep in, and lots of good food to eat."

His ears perked up.

"You're a very pretty horse. One of the students is sure to love and adore you. Come on or you'll be late." She turned and flew out of the grove. "Follow me," she called.

The horse followed the cleaning fairy to a meadow, where a crowd of creatures had gathered. "This is where I'll leave you," the fairy whispered in the horse's ear. "Wait for your instructions, and you'll soon be at the school." Specks of glitter fell onto the horse's nose as the fairy flew away. He sneezed. Some of the other creatures turned and looked at him. A small snow fox, who looked nothing like the wicked Mr. Fox, motioned for him to join her. So he did.

"Attention! Attention!" a voice commanded. Another fairy, this one much larger than the last, stood on a log and waved her arms. "Welcome to the Enchanted Forest. Not far from here, several students at Ever After High have gathered to receive their companion creatures. Each of you will be selected for a particular student. Your job will be to aid that student in the quest to fulfill his or her fairytale destiny." As she cleared her throat, a little

puff of glitter floated from her mouth. “The ceremony will begin soon, and I need to make sure everyone is in attendance. Please make a sound when I call your name.” She began to read from a clipboard. “Snow fox.” The white fox tapped her paw on the ground. “Pegasus.” A winged horse snorted. “Peacock.” A bird stepped onto the log and began to strut around. Then his tail feathers opened into a glorious blue-and-green fan. The other animals applauded.

“Dragon,” the fairy said. Branches cracked, and the forest floor trembled as a beast with scales stepped into the clearing. With eyes like red flames and smoke drifting from her nostrils, she was the most terrifying creature the horse had ever seen. With a shriek, he darted behind a tree.

I must hide, he thought.

“My, my, my,” the fairy said as she flew over to the tree. “What have we here?” She hovered a few feet off the ground and spoke gently to the horse. “First of all, you have nothing to be afraid of. The dragon will not harm you. And second of all, are you aware that you are camouflaged?” She pointed to his leg.

The horse frowned. What was she talking about? He peered down at his front leg. It looked just like tree bark. His other leg did, too. His ears flattened again. What had happened to him?

“A horse who can change colors is very special and very rare indeed.” She looked at her clipboard. “I don’t see your name on the list, but I’m sure we’ll find a match. There’s bound to be a student who needs the ability to hide.” She returned to her log.

Change colors? The horse couldn’t believe it. Is that why the fox and cat hadn’t been able to see him even though they’d shined their flashlights right at him? He’d wanted to hide, so he’d changed colors to blend in with the forest. Amazing! He stuck his front leg into a clump of tall daisies and thought about hiding. Sure enough, his leg turned green, with little white spots that looked exactly like the flowers. He neighed with delight. No one had ever called him *special* before.

“Excuse me.” The fairy waved. “But we have business to attend to.” Happy about his new discovery, the horse pranced back to the little snow fox. She smiled at him.

“Here’s how the ceremony works,” the fairy explained. “Each student has been given a popper that contains a magical spell. The spell will

connect the student to his or her special creature. When the student pulls the popper, we will hear a snapping sound, and a bright light will appear in the sky. This means that the spell has been activated and that one of you will be magically drawn to that student. It's as simple as that!" She flew above their heads. "Good luck, everyone."

To think that he'd been running for his life from two villains, had lost his way, and was about to meet a boy or a girl who would love and take care of him! The horse stomped in anticipation.

Snap! A flash of light filled the sky, followed by another *snap* and another light. "Oooh, those are the first two spell poppers," the fairy said. And right before their eyes, the snow fox and the peacock disappeared. The fairy clapped her hands. "This is so hexciting."

More snapping and more flashes, and one by one, a woodpecker, a direwolf pup, and a baby bear disappeared. Next went the unicorn, the Pegasus, and the jackalope. The dragon was the last to disappear, leaving the horse alone in the clearing.

"Oh dear, have you been forgotten?" the fairy wondered. "Well, your name wasn't on the list, after all. Perhaps you're not meant to be here. Maybe if you come back next year, there will be a match for you."

The horse hung his head. He'd come so close to having a real home. He turned away from the fairy so she couldn't see the tears pooling in his eyes.

Snap! The sky illuminated. And the ground gave way beneath the horse's hooves.

He was standing in a different part of the forest. Girls and boys were laughing. A girl with thick curls was holding the baby bear. A boy with black-framed glasses was holding the jackalope. The dragon was being led away by a girl with jet-black hair and a shimmering black dress.

The horse perked up his ears. He'd made it. He'd been chosen. But for whom?

He looked around. Every creature had found a student. The peacock was walking next to a boy who wore a golden crown. And the snow fox had curled herself around the neck of a girl who also wore a crown.

And then he saw her, standing alone. Her hair as pale as moonlight, and her smile the sweetest he'd ever seen. "Hello," she said, holding out her

palm. He sniffed her. Then he bowed his head. She ran her fingers through his mane. "My name's Darling Charming. I guess you're my horse now." She scratched his chin. "I wonder why you were chosen for me."

"I'll tell you why." The boy with the peacock walked up to them. He put an arm around the girl's shoulder. "He was chosen for you because he's on the small side. Mom and Dad wouldn't want you to ride a big horse. They'd be worried you might get hurt. This horse looks nice and safe." He gave her shoulder a squeeze. Then he and the peacock strutted away.

Darling rolled her eyes. "Safe," she grumbled. "I'm never allowed to do anything dangerous. Or hexciting." She cupped a hand around her mouth and whispered in the horse's ear. "But I have some secrets. I'm not exactly as I appear." She winked. "What about you?"

He immediately turned the color of her blue-and-silver dress. She laughed. "I guess you're not exactly as you appear, either." While the other students left the clearing, Darling walked around the horse. "It's true what my brother said. My parents only want me riding gentle horses. And they prefer that I ride sidesaddle and wear a helmet." Then, even though no one else was around, she whispered in his ear again. "But what they don't know is that I love to go fast. Can you gallop?"

Could he gallop? *Like the wind!* he wanted to say. But instead, he nodded and stomped his front hoof.

"Really?" Darling looked around. Then, with a graceful jump, she pulled herself onto his back. Her fingers gripping his mane, she said, "They've all gone back to campus. No one will see us. Show me what you've got!"

And as they galloped out of the clearing and through the nearby field, Darling Charming laughed with delight. "You *can* gallop!" she said.

After an exhilarating ride, Darling slid off the horse's back and wrapped her arms around his neck. "Thank you. That was the most fun I've had in a very long time." The horse felt the same way. His life thus far had been such a rocky journey, short on joy and long on sorrow. But as Darling led him toward the shiny Ever After High stables, he knew in his heart that his story had changed.

"I hope you don't mind if, on occasion, I ask you to use your camouflage skills." She giggled. "Just so we can have a fun adventure now and then." He nodded. She stopped walking and looked into his eyes. "And, because you're the horse of a princess, I think you should have the perfect

knightly name. I shall hereby call you Sir Gallopad.” She kissed both his cheeks, then bowed.

He smiled and bowed in return.

And his story began.

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About the Author

Suzanne Selfors feels like a Royal on some days and a Rebel on others. She's written many books for kids, including the Smells Like Dog series and the Imaginary Veterinary series.

She has two charming children and lives in a magical island kingdom, where she hopes it is her destiny to write stories forever after.

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